

A | PROBLEM | OF | CONTEXT, | INTERPRETATION | AND | ABSORPTION

Yu Yeon Kim

By their nature, international exhibitions, whether in a physical or virtual location, bring together art from disparate cultures in a context created or imposed by a curator. As they are subjected to filtering, interpretation and absorption by foreign visitors, the artworks incidentally acquire, regardless of curatorial arbitration, a new dynamic which may vary from the values intended by the artist and the significance they possessed in their original environment. As these exhibition halls are also places of transit for the visiting art world, tourists, etc; it is likely that images and critiques of the artworks are brought or sent to other locations where they are re-evaluated –spawning other ideas- other realizations and manifestations among a less mobile populace. Hence, artist, curator and public at large are all contributors to globalized culture. The question is, what exactly is it and where does it exist? Are all urban centers around the world already sharing and participating in a form of universal culture, in addition to a local one piped in by satellite and the internet? Indeed, how does contemporary art from Africa, Europe, the Americas, Asia, etc, essentially differ, if at all?

Does a global culture exist apart from national or sub-national (local) cultures or is there always a periphery of the local where cross-cultural infection ensues? In the latter part of the 20th century we witnessed an incredible acceleration and growth in the transit of information and people. This accompanied the appearance of a new Diaspora in many of the world's major capitals –each attempting to maintain its own culture while undergoing some form of integration with its host. –that of colonizer and colonized, of oppressor and oppressed. This is complicated further by the class, religious and political tensions already inherent in these transplanted societies- while infiltrating both host and Diaspora –is the leveling. “sameness-inducing”, electronic noise of consumer marketing.

To evolve, a cultural practice that can, creatively and effectively, engage the problematic of cultural globalization, necessitates a critical understanding of informational structures and the systems of micro-power with which they are interwoven. The so-called “information Revolution” has been fueled for the most part by the combined forces of multinational corporations, who also create the tools of information access that shape the way in which we perceive ourselves in our engagement with all spheres of society.

Of course, these technologies not only facilitate access to information, but control, and record how it is accessed and by whom – spawning the most fantastic surveillance system ever created to monitor and target its traffic. This data flows constantly through the networked social body, and capital interests to permeate through education, entertainment, industry, to our very thinking processes, substituting consumerist desires for our innermost reverie.

The ideologues have heralded the information Age as virtuously encouraging decentralization and fragmentation of power, and indeed, this appears to be occurring both nationally and internationally. But the conclusion of decentralization is not necessarily diminished control – on the contrary, the pragmatic industrialist or politician is able to coordinate the decentralized constituency through their communication networks, with a gain of flexibility, responsiveness, and control. The internet therefore, is a contradictory mechanism that has the potential for enhancing in the hands of critical users, and yet simultaneously affords a systematic manipulation of information to serve political and commercial interests.

Furthermore, Globalism and the internet as a transnational space of economies and culture is weighted in favor of economically powerful societies that market their own consumerist ideologies to technologically impoverished nations –the so-called “periphery”. The “world view” they promote is that of a universal consumerist aesthetic- a “multiculturalism” that com-modifies and fetishizes the aspects of other cultures while denying them economic equivalence. It embraces the idea of a non-location, where all things are mingled in eddies of cross-cultural exchange –yet it ignores the specific relevance of culture to location. The purpose, after all, has always been to dilute and dissolve national cultural identities and replace it with a Hi-tech global consumerism that favours the Western economies.

The conceptual framework proposed and developed under the title of “Trade Routes” for the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, 1997, by its artistic director Okwui Enwezor, may be interpreted as being concerned with an examination of the history of “globalization”, the nature of “Diaspora”, and the dynamics of contemporary geographies. Looking back, this direction was made even more resonant by two factors: first, the location, and secondly the organizing committee’s choice of director who was not only a black African, but also a Nigerian rather than South African.

On the one hand, Enwezor’s directive was to create a Biennale around a selection of artists that was based not on their representation of nations, but on their activity as interpreters of a new transculturalism. On the other, the location where this was manifested was undergoing a traumatic engagement in the form of “truth and Reconciliation Committee” hearings, and the general legacy of Apartheid. The tone of post-apartheid South Africa in 1997 was both introverted and xenophobic. Localized issues were dominant, not global concerns, and least of all, any ideas of transnationalism. In this context it was not surprising, to hear opinions expressing resentment at his appointment, specifically because he was a foreigner –from another African country. There was even some discontent that here was not more representation of South Africa artists, despite the fact that the Biennale had accommodated a sizeable percentage of South Africans. The irony is evident –an international Biennale of art that is investigative of globalization, placed in a locality that is turned in on itself- an interjection of polarities.

While South Africa was just emerging from a period of imposed cultural isolation, and brutal political and racial repression, it was nevertheless, a hybrid of African, European, and Asian influences, and has, in the past, been the gateway to trade routes in the East. It is perhaps by recognizing and evaluating this confluence, that South Africans regardless of colour will eventually extend their vision beyond the

boundaries of national identity, towards the problematics of global citizenship. Although the initial local reactions to the 2nd Johannesburg Biennial were of incomprehension and resentment, I believe that its occurrence will have a positive long –term resonance both within and beyond its location. The example and achievement of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale was to show works of artists who are informed as much by their localities, and origins, as they are by participation in a global dialogue. While many of these artists reside in centers like New York or Berlin, they may have originated from continents like Asia, Africa or Latin America. They embody the new Diaspora, and express the contradictions and interaction of identities and language brought into flux with other cultures, in foreign lands. These artists represent not nations or “foreignity”, so much as themselves but their works make apparent the complexity of a cultural interchange whose political dynamics are often emphasized by colonialist and imperialist legacies.

It was not the ambition of “Transversions” – the exhibition I curated for the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, to provide a clear narrative or illustration of the nature of global culture exchange, but rather to bring together work that concerned itself with the interrelationships of political, cultural, physical, and personal, environments. While “Transversions” did not represent a clear structure its coherence was provided by its disparate components that combined to convey a sense of a cultural multiplex. It was also my intention that it be an incidental portrait of an era distinguished by the hyper-transit of thought and bodies, of hi-speed information delivery and assimilation .of the politics of physicality and location.

Every exhibition I have curated has entailed a process of discovery of concepts and realizations that have gradually revealed to me my own direction and curatorial language. Whether the exhibition has been in Johannesburg, Berlin, New York, Mexico or Kwangju, each has in some way extended or built upon the ideas of the previous one. “Exotica Incognita”, which I curated in 2000 for the3rd Kwangju Biennale as Commissioner for Latin America, was very much informed by the experiences of both the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale and the 1998 exhibition, “Five Continents and One City” (*Cinco Continentes y una Ciudad*), Mexico City. While those exhibitions dealt to an extent with the spiritual and physical dilemmas of diasporic existence and colonial legacies, “Exotica Incognita” addressed a continent whose societies were formed of complex flux of Colonial, Imperialist, African and indigenous cultures. While these cultures derive from both oppressor and oppressed they cannot be unraveled. Moreover, these are countries in which miscegenation, particularly in Brazil, was widely practiced –so that the integration of these antipathetic cultures was due as much to crossing of bloodlines as it was to their proximity. Nevertheless, these polygenous cultures have emerged from ruthless European colonization of the Continent, a near eradication of its indigenous peoples and relentless and continous bullying and manipulation by North American neighbor, paranoidly insecure about the stability of its “back yard”. Among its concerns, “Exotica Incognita” approached the misconceptions that are the foundations of the European and North American exoticising of Latin America. It observes that while these have acted upon and within South American cultures, they have been consumed and reformed into cultures of resistances. Perhaps the cultural, linguistic, political and economic intersections and relocation of peoples and

cultures that have characterized the Latin American experience is really a condensed model of the accelerated “globalization” straddling the 20th and 21st centuries. The difference being that , whereas European and American Modernism proposed an internationalist universal aesthetic that assimilated aspects of cultures within its imperial reach, yet denied them equivalence, in Latin America it by necessity engaged the problematic of these relationships within and outside of itself.

“Exotica Incognita” also contradicted the idea of “Man and Space” –the overall theme title of the 3rd Kwangju Biennale and one, I thought, which presumed the universality of its components. To quote a section of my essay from the catalogue:

“This was precisely the conceit of the Western Modernists who understood ‘space’ from a colonial perspective (i.e. territories to be exploited), and “man” as being white. Also fundamental problem with current discourse on ‘Globalism’ is that it revels in an idea of ‘non-location0, a kind of universal space in which everyone is brought together through the technological wonders of hypermedia and shares multicultural values. The reality of this is that the internet, that great accelerator of “Globalism”, despite its diversity and contradictions, has a tendency to present a ‘world view’ sponsored by Euro-American capital and hi-tech industries that increasingly resembles that of Modernist internationalism. This expects of course, that non-Western cultures will adopt Western values while they placidly abandon their own ‘exotic’ and ‘primitive’ cultural practices in favor of Western Hi-tech Globalism. The problem that underlies this is the transportation of ideas from one space to another and dynamics that then ensue between those areas. Like traders, curators transport a set of ideas and values form one location to another, and in so doing trigger a magnitude of possibilities at either location. The flow is never simply one-directional. Both the exporter and importer are subject to contamination by the material they handle. However, culture can be said to have a relevance to ‘place’, and without an anchor in its original context its authority diminishes. Thus the ‘globalization’ of cultures could be seen as a process of devaluation, a system of meanings displaced in a foreign context. In Latin America, it is exactly this displacement in a foreign context, that of African slaves and European colonizers (with their preconceptions about its indigenous peoples and the ‘space’ of its continent), that has formed the bedrock of cultures of resistance peculiar to their location”.

While I seek always to show remarkable art, which also transforms my own perspectives –and am wary of art which is apparently made as an expression of theory rather than from life experience- I nevertheless strive to readdress and change the way in which cultures are perceived. Although perspectives are changing, Eastern, African and indigenous cultures have historically been the subject of unfavorable comparison to those of the West, which has usually held its own art forms in the highest esteem while conveniently forgetting its pillage of the other. It has often been assumed by Westerners that the contemporary art of Asia, Africa, South America and the Pacific is only a

recompilation of the forms and language of European/American Modernism with its self-referential totality. The reserve could also be said – that the heritage of the West owes much to centuries of imports of cultural artifacts and ideas from Africa, the Orient, Asia and the Pacific. Facilitated by trade routes and colonialism, this cultural assimilation had a direct influence on the development of Modernism- As Western Modernism “borrowed” the cultures of other nations and colonies, so do contemporary artists and cultural practitioners from these “Others” now re-appropriate in their own practice what was originally theirs –with the difference that it becomes politically charged by their use of it.

This has been particularly my approach in “Translated Acts” (Performance and Body Art from East Asia-China, Korea, Taiwan, Japan and their diasporas from 1990to 2001) which was originally shown at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin in 2001 and the Queens Museum of Art, New York. The artists in the exhibition mostly come from countries that have been irrevocably changed by the forces of Colonialism, Imperialism and Revolution. The exhibition reveals both the differences and similarities that East Asian artists share –perspectives that have been determined to a great extent by the unprecedented economic, social and cultural turmoil and development experienced by the region since World War II. It also explores is unique to these artists and their culture in comparison to their Western counterparts, and examines the implications that globalization and the technologies that implement it have had for East Asian art. The need to address and express these issues of personal and social identify in the face of an international flux of ideas and influences is perhaps even more poignant for the exiled ones or those raised in Diaspora communities of Europe or America. The exiled, whose experience is simultaneous alienation and immersion in the foreign culture, is forced to redefine the way they correlate with it in order to comprehend the legacy of their own culture. They constantly transit between different planes of cultural reality while being in the same place. While concerns of identify and existence are different in Asia and the West, they are nevertheless entangled in the development of Modernism and contemporary culture. Performance artists have consistently challenged established hierarchies and social mores and it is almost a given that the more oppressive and authoritarian the society, the more extreme is the artists’ response. This is particularly the case in countries like China, Taiwan and Korea who have experienced such tumultuous changes, including revolution, occupation, repressive governments, and neo-imperialism throughout the Twentieth Century.

Irrespective of the pessimism I have expressed with regard to Globalism and its modern facilitator, the internet, they are without doubt among the defining issues of our era and will shape the future for some time. The internet is by nature a contradictory and shifting field. No sooner is one paradigm established than another replaces it. Its accelerated development is indisputably powered by commerce yet it also appears to evolve organically. It has greatly enhanced our ability to communicate, yet we are increasingly thinking and creating within the parameters of electronic programs that were created to meet specific commercial demands. It enables us to collaborate internationally while at the same time it exacerbates the division between nations who are technologically empowered and those who are not. It has permanently changed the way we perceive our relationship to the rest of the world yet the technology through which our communications are channeled may bias our perception.

Cultural practitioners who challenge and critically engage this milieu and subvert it to their creative purpose exposing its contradictions and dynamics can effect a radical shift in the way we regard our relationship to other cultures. A proper understanding of other cultures can only be enabled by an appraisal of our own legacy- to put it euphemistically- of absorption and appropriation, and how we continue to be implicated in their exploitation.

HOMEOPATHIC

CURATING

Eduardo Abaroa

First of all I would like to thank the organizers of this symposium. I do not know whether everyone here is aware of the fact that when we speakers were asked to take part in these discussions, we were given a text on which to base our essays. This text presents a concise survey of the situation of contemporary art in recent years: the proliferation of spaces- both physical and in the media- devoted to art and their consequent assimilation of the general public in the form of gigantic biennials and blockbusters. Presenting us with this situation and wondering whether it has a positive effect on “the overall education of the citizen”, the text I mentioned asks us: Curating: how, who by, for whom?” besides the fact it is impossible to answer this question due to its ample scope, what I find frankly problematic is the way it relates curating –and thus art- to such a grotesque abstraction as this “overall education of the citizen”. Imposing a bit on your patience, in the following essay I will broach these topics, though answering the question curating in a categorical manner is, I must admit, beyond my abilities. My response limits itself to defining what I call homeopathic curating, presenting it as a broad strategy of cultural interaction for the concrete and electron jungles that we call contemporary societies.

“How, who by and for whom?” Faced with these questions about curating, we might first ask “where?” And here I am not necessarily refereeing to a specific country or city, but rather to a “place” within culture. I do not believe that the goal is for the curating of exhibitions to be carried out in the same in Sao Paulo museum as the Guggenheim Bilbao. Each context requires different answers to this question. Alternative or improvised exhibitions spaces have different goals and methods than museums, and state-controlled museums have different obligations than private one. In addition to these complex issues, which are enough to make anyone's head spin, the question also changes